




EXPERIENCE REPORT

Experience report of nursing students in a supervised curricular internship
in the COVID-19 pandemic context


Relato de experiência de estudantes de enfermagem em estágio curricular supervisionado no contexto da
pandemia COVID-19

Informe de la experiencia de estudiantes de enfermería en una pasantía curricular supervisada en el contexto
de la pandemia de COVID-19


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ABSTRACT

Objective: To report Nursing students' experience during a curricular internship in a hospital environment in the COVID-19 pandemic context. **Methods:** This is an experience report, of a descriptive-reflective nature, about the experiences of four students attending the 9th semester of the Nursing course at a Public University from the state of Minas Gerais, during the Supervised Curricular Internship in a hospital environment in the COVID-19 pandemic context. **Results:** The initial practice in a hospital environment generated insecurity in the students, due to fear in the face of the current scenario of increased COVID-19 cases. The students experienced frustration in not providing dignified care to these patients and fear of contaminating themselves and being a means of spreading the virus to others. In addition, some students presented symptoms suggestive of mental distress. **Conclusion:** The leading role of the Nursing team was observed by the students when they witnessed, in their everyday lives, the set of actions provided for the assistance and care of patients aggravated by COVID-19. Despite the professionals' work overload and non-guarantee of rest between shifts, there was care continuity. **Descriptors:** Students, Nursing. COVID-19. Nursing Care.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Relatar a experiência de estudantes de enfermagem durante a realização de estágio curricular em ambiente hospitalar no contexto da pandemia COVID-19. **Métodos:** Trata-se de um relato de experiência, de cunho descritivo-reflexivo sobre as vivências de quatro estudantes do curso de Enfermagem do 9º semestre de uma Universidade Pública do Estado de Minas Gerais, durante a realização do Estágio Curricular Supervisionado em ambiente hospitalar no contexto da pandemia COVID-19. **Resultados:** A prática inicial em ambiente hospitalar gerou insegurança nos estudantes, devido ao medo diante do cenário atual de casos aumentados da COVID-19. Os estudantes vivenciaram frustração em não propiciar cuidado digno a esses pacientes e medo em se contaminar e ser um meio de difusão do vírus para os demais. Além disso, alguns estudantes apresentaram sintomatologia sugestiva de sofrimento mental. **Conclusão:** O protagonismo da equipe de enfermagem foi observado pelos estudantes ao presenciarem no dia a dia, o conjunto de ações dispensadas para a assistência e cuidados de pacientes agravados pela COVID-19. Apesar da sobrecarga de trabalho dos profissionais, da não garantia de descanso entre os plantões, houve a continuidade da assistência prestada. **Descritores:** Estudantes de Enfermagem. COVID-19. Cuidados de Enfermagem.

RESUMÉN

Objetivo: Informar la experiencia de estudiantes de Enfermería durante la pasantía curricular en un ambiente hospitalario en el contexto de la pandemia COVID-19. **Métodos:** Informe de experiencia de naturaleza descriptiva-reflexiva sobre las vivencias de cuatro estudiantes del 9º semestre de la carrera de Enfermería en una Universidad Pública del estado de Minas Gerais, durante la Pasantía Curricular Supervisada en un ambiente hospitalario en el contexto de la pandemia COVID-19. **Resultados:** La práctica inicial en el ambiente hospitalario generó inseguridad en los estudiantes debido al temor ante la situación actual de mayor cantidad de casos de COVID-19. Los estudiantes se sintieron frustrados por no poder brindar atención digna a estos pacientes y miedo de infectarse y ser un vector de transmisión del virus a otras personas. Además, algunos estudiantes presentaron sintomatología que sugería sufrimiento mental. **Conclusión:** Los estudiantes fueron testigos del protagonismo del equipo de Enfermería al presenciar día tras día todas las acciones realizadas para brindar asistencia y atención a pacientes con cuadros agravados por COVID-19. A pesar de la sobrecarga de trabajo de los profesionales y de la no garantía de descanso entre turnos, hubo continuidad de la asistencia. **Descriptor:** Estudiantes de Enfermería. COVID-19. Atención de Enfermería.

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INTRODUCTION

The process of training nurses aims at preparing the students for an efficient performance in all professional scopes and scenarios, providing, in addition to psychomotor techniques and skills, professional development based on competences. For this, the Nursing course curriculum has theoretical and practical disciplines, in addition to the guarantee of performing an internship supervised by a professor and/or preceptor nurse in public health and hospital health units. Therefore, the current requirements in nurses' profile demand generalist training that supports and provides a Nursing performance that is resolute to the health demands in different contexts, focused on comprehensive, humanistic and transdisciplinary care.⁽¹⁾

However, the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) emerged in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, province of Hubei, China. The virus is transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes and/or through contact. The symptoms are non-specific, causing from asymptomatic and mild infections to atypical pneumonias, imposing significant respiratory impairment and high mortality rates. Thus, in 2020, for being infectious disease that simultaneously threatened several people at the global level, the new human coronavirus came to be considered as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO).⁽²⁾

With the COVID-19 pandemic several sectors and services interrupted their activities, aiming to contain virus spread in environments marked by high transmission chances. Among these activities, in-person classes in public and private Teaching Institutions were interrupted with no foreseen resumption. In-person classes and mandatory curricular internships were suspended and the academic community needed to reinvent itself to use online teaching platforms in the remote classes offered, aiming to comply with the academic calendar.⁽³⁾

Thus, through Preliminary Measure No. 934, interns were granted course conclusion during the pandemic period. Ordinances issued by the Ministry of Education authorized the resumption of practical activities of courses in the health area, observing the requirements for the protection of students in the field, with free availability of Personal Protective Equipment and compliance with safety protocols. Consequently, many universities chose to resume the mandatory curricular internship in the hospital and public health settings during the coronavirus pandemic.⁽³⁾

In view of the emergency situation caused by the virus, hospital internships offer university students the possibility of experiencing direct care for COVID-19 patient, which ends up increasing the susceptibility of these students, who were not contemplated for vaccination. Furthermore, Nursing students' performance in the hospital setting during the pandemic enables experiences that had not been observed or studied until then in the theoretical classes. In addition to that, the uncertainties and exhaustion when facing management of cases aggravated by the coronavirus cause in Nursing

METHODS

This is an experience report of a descriptive-reflective nature, about the experiences of four students attending the 9th semester of the Nursing course at a Public University of the state of Minas Gerais, during the Supervised Curricular Internship (SCI) in a hospital environment, in the COVID-19 pandemic context.

The report was described by the students and by the supervising professor based on the observation and experiences in the assistance provided to suspected and confirmed COVID-19 patients. The hospital in which the internship was developed is in a municipality located 150 km to the Southwest of Belo Horizonte in Minas Gerais, with an estimated population of 41,840,000 inhabitants. The experience covered the period from November 2020 to March 2021, totaling 405 hours of SCI in the health service, and had the preceptorship of nurses from the institution and direct supervision of a professor appointed by the students' university of origin.

The hospital is included in the State Contingency Plan proposed by the State Government, and is a reference for COVID-19 treatment in the region. This report is developed based on the main experiences of Nursing students in the SCI, describing the challenges of working in the COVID-19 pandemic scenario. It is noted that, for being an experience report, it was not necessary to submit the study to any Committee of Ethics in Research Studies with Human Beings.

RESULTS

The Nursing students' performance in the internship filed was only initiated after due authorization by the hospital General Management and mutual agreement. The practice in the hospital setting generated insecurity in the students due to the fear towards the increase in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. However, guidelines were offered to the interns, who learned about the operational norms, routines and protocols of the hospital Nursing team. Guidelines regarding the use of spaces, biosafety measures, patient care, personal hygiene and correct use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were also presented by the Nursing team.

Performing body hygiene (shaved/trimmed beard, tied hair, short nails without nail polish, no perfume or makeup) and biosafety measures (absence of adornments such as earrings, rings, necklaces), were recommended measures for the interns' safety, by avoiding means of spreading cross-infection during the practical activities. In addition to that, internal hospital regulations were followed, such as the following: avoiding agglomerations; keeping a distance of at least two meters; avoiding contact with furniture, walls and other objects; performing

asepsis of devices in the sector whenever possible; and always using NR95 masks and 70% alcohol for hand hygiene whenever necessary. These measures considerably reduce propagation of the coronavirus in the work environment, as well as any possible contamination among professionals and students.

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In relation to the units and sectors in which the students had the opportunity to work during the internship period, based on the schedule proposed by the Chief Nursing Technician (CNT) of the institution, they are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Sectors visited by each student and their permanence time. Oliveira, Minas Gerais, Brazil, 2021.

Sectors	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4
Surgical Block	14 days	10 days	11 days	11 days
Hospitalization sector (Medical Clinic, Surgical Clinic, Maternity Ward and Stroke Unit)	21 days	25 days	16 days	11 days
Intensive Care Center	16 days	11 days	24 days	14 days
Municipal Emergency Service	11 days	16 days	11 days	26 days

Source: authors (2022).

Some sectors, such as the Surgical Block, the Intensive Care Center (ICC) and the Municipal Emergency Service (MES), require sterile clothing (exclusive for the hospital) for the professionals' performance. Consequently, when they reached the sectors, the students changed clothes and started the activities delegated by the Preceptor Nurse. Each sector has its own routines and standards, serving patients with different health needs and, therefore, it becomes necessary that, in addition to skills and competences, the students apply theoretical knowledge during the provision of Nursing care.

In units such as the Emergency Service and the Intensive Care Center it was possible to maintain direct contact with several patients contaminated by COVID-19, as presented in Table 2. At the beginning of the internship (November 2020), the numbers of occupied beds and deaths were relatively low. In the Intensive Care Center, occupancy increased from 30% to 40% in average, with a total of 09 deaths in nine months of pandemic.

Table 2. Contact with patients contaminated by COVID-19 in each sector visited. Oliveira, Minas Gerais, Brazil, 2021.

Sectors	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4
Surgical Block	No	No	No	No
Hospitalization sector (Medical Clinic, Surgical Clinic, Maternity Ward and Stroke Unit)	Yes	Yes	No	No
Intensive Care Center	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal Emergency Service	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: authors (2022).

With worsening of the pandemic and flexibilization of various economic activities, during January and February 2021, an increase in the number of people seeking care was observed, arriving with symptoms suggestive of respiratory deterioration at the Emergency Room. Consequently, the local health system collapsed, with lack of beds, inputs and professionals to care for severely-ill patients. The students experienced the frustration of not providing dignified care to these patients, in addition to the constant fear of contaminating themselves or ending up as a means of spreading the virus to their family members and friends. Thus, some students reported symptoms suggestive of mental distress, such as constant insecurity, muscle pain, sensation of anxiety, fear and impotence during the mandatory curricular internship.

In addition to that, due to unavailability of beds for the hospitalization of infected patients who needed oxygen therapy, the local hospital relocated employees and transformed emergency care beds into "extra beds" for hospitalization. Therefore, there was a need to open another 20 COVID-19 ward beds in order to meet the demand. The Red Room managed to stabilize some critically-ill patients (with a limited maximum number of four beds) and in need

of ventilation, until a vacancy appeared in the ICC. However, many of these patients eventually evolved to death and the students experienced feelings related to grief loss and pain, which had not been witnessed until then in their brief performance in other sectors.

A specifically worrying situation took place during the curricular internship in relation to non-guarantee of vaccination against COVID-19 for the students. Although they were working in units that treated patients with suspected and confirmed infection by the coronavirus, the students were unable to receive the doses recommended by the National Immunization Program (*Programa Nacional de Imunização*, PNI), made available by the municipality where they lived. This fact ended up generating insecurity and frustration in the students and in the hospital institution itself, which made every possible effort along with the Municipal Health Department to expand vaccination to the students. It is noted that all the health professionals working in the aforementioned hospital institution were vaccinated with both doses recommended by the Ministry of Health.

It is emphasized that the first dose of the vaccine against the coronavirus was only administered to the

students after the SCI has ended, in March 2021. Until February 2022, the occupancy rate of ICU and ward beds intended for COVID-19 had variations and was 100% at several moments, with the first collapse on 03/11/2021, period during which the students were undergoing the internship. The last high bed occupancy rate was in February 2020, where the ICC beds represented 90% of the total occupancy. At the beginning of March 2022, for not presenting any hospitalization, the ICC and COVID-19 Ward sectors were deactivated and continue as such until the present day. Currently, hospitalizations are in isolated rooms from the Medical Clinic at the hospital itself.

DISCUSSION

The gowning and degowning procedure is fundamental and must follow the guidelines set forth by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). The Federal Nursing Council (*Conselho Federal de Enfermagem*, COFEN) guides on the step-by-step procedure for putting on and taking off PPE items, aiming at Nursing professionals safety and health during care provision. Understanding the inherent risks during Nursing care for a patient who is a COVID-19 victim guarantees attention to safety and individual protection standards and reduces the chance of infection in the professional providing the assistance.⁽⁶⁾

The sensation of fear was listed in a study⁽⁷⁾, which sought to observe the feelings of professors and students in relation to changes in the academic calendar. The authors also showed that fear is a sensation that provides a state of alert manifested by the fear of doing something, usually because of feeling threatened, physically and/or psychologically, which impairs the learning process.

At the same time, another study⁽⁸⁾ showed that the students who comprised the sample experienced negative feelings such as the fear of being contaminated by the coronavirus and the uncertainty of a possible progression of the disease. These sensations were reasserted by the frequent media updates regarding the increase in the death rate in the population. Excess of information can cause anxiety and sadness, which was reflected in the students' internship.

Added to this is the fact that the collapse in the city's health system increased the professionals' hour load, which, due to the impossibility of rest, ended up causing the distancing of many nurses and nursing technicians from their functions, overloading the students' activities during the internship.⁽⁸⁾ Thus, with 100% occupancy of the ICU and Ward beds, several employees on leave because they were contaminated, an outdated team and a high number of patients, the routines that were no longer "light" became more strenuous for the available professionals.

Nursing professionals who are on the front line in the fight against COVID-19 present contamination by the coronavirus on a large scale. On April 15th, 2020, the Federal Nursing Council (COFEN) announced that 4,000 Nursing professionals were on leave for

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In a study that sought to reflect on the repercussions for the mental health of the Nursing team that worked in the pandemic context, it was verified that these professionals constantly present psychological distress due to lack of supplies and individual and collective protective equipment and to strenuous workload, in addition to the precariousness of adequate training to work in intensive care units.⁽¹⁰⁾

In a similar study that sought to assess the working conditions of Nursing professionals who worked directly in the care provided to infected people, pointing out the impact of the pandemic on the lives of these professionals, it was observed that the scarcity of PPE items, professionals who worked double shifts, and the constant fear of being contaminated ended up contributing to the onset of physical wear out symptoms, in addition to intense and sometimes limiting mental distress, harming the workers' personal life and care provision to the patients.⁽¹¹⁾

The disease caused by the coronavirus has significantly impacted the everyday routine of thousands of people around the world, their rituals, tasks and pleasures. Among these, the farewell process and grief experiences between people and family members were profoundly and extremely painfully affected for those who lost their loved ones to the disease. Due to the potential contamination risk during care and after the death of the infected person, family members and friends cannot accompany the care process or say goodbye in the process of terminality, death and mourning. It is also expected that the professionals who participate in the assistance absorb the emotional burden involved.⁽¹²⁻¹³⁾

It is known that vaccines are highly effective in reducing vaccine-preventable bacterial and viral diseases. The National Immunization Program (PNI) guarantees free and comprehensive vaccination of children, adolescents, adults, pregnant women, aged and indigenous peoples, through the National Vaccination Calendar and campaigns. Currently, COVID-19 vaccines are developed safely before being distributed to the population.⁽¹⁴⁾

The National Plan for the Operationalization of Vaccination Against COVID-19, prepared by the Ministry of Health, provides guidelines and recommendations for the operationalization of vaccination against the coronavirus by Brazilian municipalities. In its Annex I, the document describes the priority groups for receiving both recommended doses, among them, health professionals who are working directly in the care and assistance of infected patients. The text highlights that all health professionals will be immunized against COVID-19 as a priority, and that "health students and those in the technical health area in hospital internships, primary care, clinics and laboratories are included in this group".⁽¹⁴⁾

However, it is verified that, despite the constant increase in the number of infected people since the beginning of the pandemic, there was no planning

and advance purchase of inputs for the manufacture of vaccines on a large scale by the Federal Government, which ended up causing inefficient coverage of the people included in the priority groups, among them, the health students and interns.⁽¹⁵⁾

From this perspective, it is known that community protection and COVID-19 control will only be effective through mass vaccination and continuity of preventive and control measures against spread of the coronavirus. Ensuring broad vaccination exerts a direct impact on the reduction of cases aggravated by the virus, promoting flattening of the epidemic curve, in addition to reducing the burden on health systems and illness among the professionals involved in the care provided.⁽¹⁶⁻¹⁷⁾

It is noted that, as this is an experience report by Nursing students in a single medium-sized hospital unit, there may be differences between self-reported experiences. As for the limitations of the service, the practices performed by each student were differentiated based on the units they were in and the teams that were assigned at the time.

The experience reported allowed understanding the difficulties experienced during the mandatory curricular hospital internship at a time permeated by uncertainties and challenges regarding the best individual protection measures, the guarantee of inputs for the assistance provided and the potential illness of multiprofessional teams.

CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulties listed, the students' participation in the field during the COVID-19 pandemic contributes significantly to the criticality, analysis and decision-making process in complex situations, in addition to enabling skills development. Experiencing in the practice the theoretical knowledge acquired at the University allowed the students to understand the real Nursing performance and the inherent risks of the profession.

The leading role of the Nursing team was observed by the students when they witnessed, in their everyday lives, the set of actions provided for the assistance and care of patients aggravated by COVID-19. Despite the professionals work overload and the non-guarantee of rest between shifts, there was care continuity. Therefore, it is urgent to reassert and value Nursing as an indispensable profession in society. Based on the above, it is noticed that it is fundamental to guarantee emotional support and guidance on how to recognize signs of mental distress, as they are important measures for maintaining the health of these professionals.

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